



City of Helena

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Downtown Code Frequently Asked Questions

How is this new code different or more restrictive than what we currently have?

- Current city code focuses on which uses are permitted within each district and the density that can be associated with each. The new code will allow for a greater diversity of uses while helping to regulate how buildings should look.
- The new code isn't more restrictive. Rather, it's just different because it emphasizes allowing a building space to dictate the uses that should go in it based on how they are designed and appear from the street. For instance, having high levels of transparency on a ground floor story allows for lots of bright, open spaces that are well suited to commercial uses.

What does the code impact exactly?

- The code sets standards for features of a building façade as well as dimensional standards (e.g., height, setbacks, lot coverage). It does not dictate design or set requirements for interior renovations, and it does not demand use of specific building materials.
- The code also sets standards for parking and signage that are particular to just the downtown core of Helena.

Will I have to change my property to meet code?

- All existing uses and buildings will be grandfathered in with the new code, and there will be no provision to require conformance within a given timeframe.
- The code will be applicable to new buildings (infill development, complete teardowns and redevelopments) or could be triggered based on a percentage of the building being expanded or remodeled in the future, as follows:
 - If 25% or more of a façade wall is being altered, the stories of the building being affected must be brought into compliance.
 - If an addition or expansion to a building is happening affecting 25% or more of a building's existing floor area (across ALL stories), the new design standards apply.
 - If a building remodel occurs that affects more than 75% of the existing floor area of the whole building, all design standards apply (except for setbacks).
 - Buildings on the National Register of Historic Places or that are designated as contributing to a historic district are exempt if code-required modifications affect their historic integrity.

Why is the city creating a new downtown code?

- Creating the downtown code was an action item from the 2016 Downtown Neighborhood Plan, which is a Growth Policy amendment.

- This new code implements the Growth Policy by promoting more mixed-use development in the downtown core of Helena, and helps to further the DNP’s vision for a more vibrant downtown that has a more inviting look and feel through façade styles that are more typical of our historic buildings.

What is the Transitional Residential District, and how is it different from the Downtown District?

- The Transitional Residential district is being created as a buffer between the downtown core of Helena and the residential districts that flank it on either side. It is a “transition” between the more urban downtown and residential uses.
- The key difference is that residential uses are permitted on the ground floor in the Transitional Residential District by right, whereas residential uses aren’t a permitted use on the ground floor in the Downtown District.
- Additionally, there is a height restriction in the Transitional Residential District (36 feet maximum). There is not a height restriction in the Downtown District. Both districts have a minimum height requirement of 22 feet.

How did you set the boundary?

- The boundary is based on the Downtown Neighborhood Plan boundary, but also includes: some parts of downtown that historically developed at the same time; used similar building design styles or massing to the rest of the downtown; or are generally part of important gateways to the downtown, such as Reeder’s Alley, Central School, and the gateways into downtown (along Lyndale, Euclid, and Helena Avenues).

How does this affect parking?

- The proposed zone change calls for no minimum number of off-street parking spaces, but does call for a maximum number of parking spaces based on use types.
- The code emphasizes having parking set to the rear or side of structures (or even below ground in a garage, if designs permit it) as opposed to in front of a building. This should help promote a more inviting, active commercial street for people in the downtown.

What are next steps for adoption of the code?

- City staff anticipate taking the downtown code to the City Commission by either late April or early May
- If the code is adopted, there will then be a second set of hearings to adopt the boundary for the district. The Zoning Commission will have a hearing to consider recommending adoption of the district boundary to the City Commission, and then the City Commission will hold hearings on the boundary adoption.
 - This second set of hearings will require another notice be sent to the property owners located in—or within 150 feet of—the proposed district boundary.

How do I learn more?

Please contact the Planning Division of the Community Development Department at 406-447-8490 or at citycommunitydevelopment@helenamt.gov, or visit the website at www.helenamt.gov